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Surveying Oregon's Digital Heritage Collections

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BETH is the coordinator for the Oregon Heritage Commission, a group of leaders from across the state who work collaboratively to champion resources, recognition, and funding for preserving Oregon's past. The Heritage Commission is part of the Oregon Heritage division of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department and works as a catalyst and coordinator for organizations in the state that gather heritage and make it available to the public. Beth previously worked at Washington County Museum, the Museum of Natural & Cultural History, and taught internationally. She holds an MA in Folklore from the University of Oregon with a Museum Studies Certificate.

In 2018, the Oregon Heritage Commission conducted a survey of heritage organizations across the state to capture data regarding digitization efforts. The goal of the survey was to collect a baseline of information on the types of digital collections in Oregon, existing digital infrastructure, and a level of interest in collaborative options. Data gathered was shared with our partners, including the Orbis Cascade Alliance, to aid their work in considering how to create an on-ramp for smaller collections to enter into the Digital Public Library of America. This work followed the 2013 Environmental Scan of Digital Collections conducted by the State Library of Oregon and the outcomes of the 2015 Northwest Digital Summit, which identified overall gaps in support for digital collections at heritage organizations in Oregon and Washington. Unlike previous statewide assessments, the 2018 survey strove to capture data from heritage organizations of all types and sizes, both with and without digital collections, so that the Oregon Heritage Commission and our partners can determine strategies, tools, and trainings to best assist organizations at all stages of the digitization process.

Methodology of Survey

The 2018 Survey of Digital Heritage Collections in Oregon was open from February 15 through April 30, 2018 and was distributed via electronic link through emails, Listserv announcements, and social media. Approximately 440 paper copies of the survey were sent to heritage organizations with a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. Oregon Heritage Mentors, who are trained professionals that volunteer their time to provide technical assistance to heritage organizations, utilized their regional networks to encourage participation in all corners of the state. Sixty-two surveys were returned via mail.



For the purpose of the survey, digital collections were defined as cultural heritage materials that have been scanned (like photographs, postcards, court records, or letters) or that originate in digital form (like digital photos or oral histories recorded digitally). Digital collections include the type of content you'll find in Washington Rural Heritage and Oregon Digital. They do not include published digital content (like eBooks).

Who Responded?

The results of the survey included responses from 178 organizations of varying size and sophistication. The majority of responders were museums and libraries, followed by historical societies, genealogical societies, and government agencies. Other responders included a public garden, a historic cemetery group, and nonprofits formed to preserve historic houses. Of those who responded, 128 organizations reported that they have digital collections, and 114 of those organizations are either currently digitizing their collections or have digitized collections in the past. This indicates that 64 percent of responding organizations have some level of infrastructure in place to complete digitization work.

What Did We Learn?

The majority of Oregon's cultural heritage organizations, large and small, are dealing with digital collections. Some are actively digitizing while others are caring for digital collections that have been donated to them. All together, we estimate these collections account for 231,000 to 580,000 digital heritage objects in the state. Photograph and textual collections account for the largest portion of digital objects, but moving images, artifacts, and artwork are also prominent.

- **PRIORITIZING ITEMS TO DIGITIZE:** Overall, organizations recognize digital collections are a way to preserve material of importance and value. Prioritizing items to digitize is mainly driven by significance to the mission of the organization (57 percent), as well as the need to preserve materials that are fragile and deteriorating (53 percent). Many organizations also indicated that available grants are a driving factor in determining what collections to digitize.
- **TRAINING OF STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS:** Survey results indicate that heritage organizations have limited training when it comes to digitizing. Responders reported that over half of their collections staff and volunteers (56 percent) have no training in collections care. While many of the larger organizations that are digitizing their cultural heritage collections rely on professional experience, the smaller organizations rely on knowledge gained at workshops and trainings, as well as materials found online.
- **EQUIPMENT:** The type and quality of equipment used by organizations to digitize collections are varied. Many organizations own or have access to a scanner and photo editing software (99 percent and 86 percent respectively). The vast majority also report having access to digital storage, including a combination of hard drives, servers, and



cloud storage. Only about half of responders report access to audio conversion and audio editing software.

- **METADATA:** This survey recorded little about metadata standards, other than whether or not organizations are creating metadata. Survey takers were asked if their collections have metadata (defined as descriptive information that explains and locates the file) which can be used to retrieve digital items. Only 40 of 114 organizations with digital collections responded, which indicates the question was either unclear or that many organizations are not creating metadata. Of the 40 organizations that responded, 28 said they do have metadata, six said they don't, and six were unsure.
- **ONLINE ACCESS:** Of the 128 organizations with digital heritage collections, 42 report their collections are available online to the public. Institutions are utilizing a variety of systems to place their collections online including Past Perfect Online, CONTENTdm, web pages, and various social media platforms such as Flickr, and Facebook. Our partners at Orbis Cascade Alliance noted that only nine of those online collections have public-facing systems that offer digital collections in a structured way that can interface with other systems. Past Perfect software is commonly used by museums, however, the system presents difficulties harvesting metadata for aggregation.
- **ORGANIZATIONS NOT DIGITIZING:** Of the 50 organizations that responded without digital collections, 45 expressed an interest in digitizing. Organizations that aren't digitizing are largely choosing not to due to lack of staff and volunteer capacity. A common theme in survey comments is, "We are all volunteers without training," and "Older volunteers don't like to use computers" (Q24, Comments 6 & 9). Other organizations acknowledge that turnover in volunteers is a huge set-back, "One of the big problems for small organizations is continuity of knowledge; one person learns how to participate, then when they leave it's hard to pass on the knowledge" (Q33, Comment 18).

Interesting Trends

Several trends emerged from the survey responses. One is that heritage organizations see providing public access to collections as a priority. However, when asked for the top three goals in creating or acquiring digital collections, access was second to preservation. We are curious to follow up with responders to understand what access means to them and how they view online digital items as access points to their collections. There may be opportunities to reframe how heritage organizations think of access in general.



Digital Heritage Collections in Oregon

A survey of digital heritage collections in Oregon was conducted by the Oregon Heritage Commission in 2018 with funding from the Oregon Cultural Trust. Information gathered from the survey will be used to identify training opportunities and potential statewide solutions. This is a snapshot of some of the results that were captured.

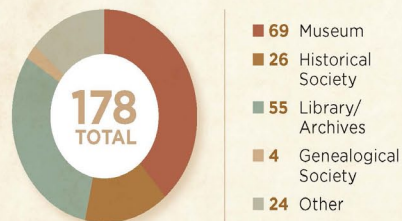
Big Picture Data



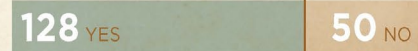
WELL OVER 231,000

digital items exist in heritage organizations in Oregon

Type of Organization that Responded



Organizations with Digital Collections



Interest in Digitizing Collections



Of the 50 organizations without digital collections, the majority expressed interest in digitizing.

- 45 Interested in digitizing
- 5 Not interested in digitizing

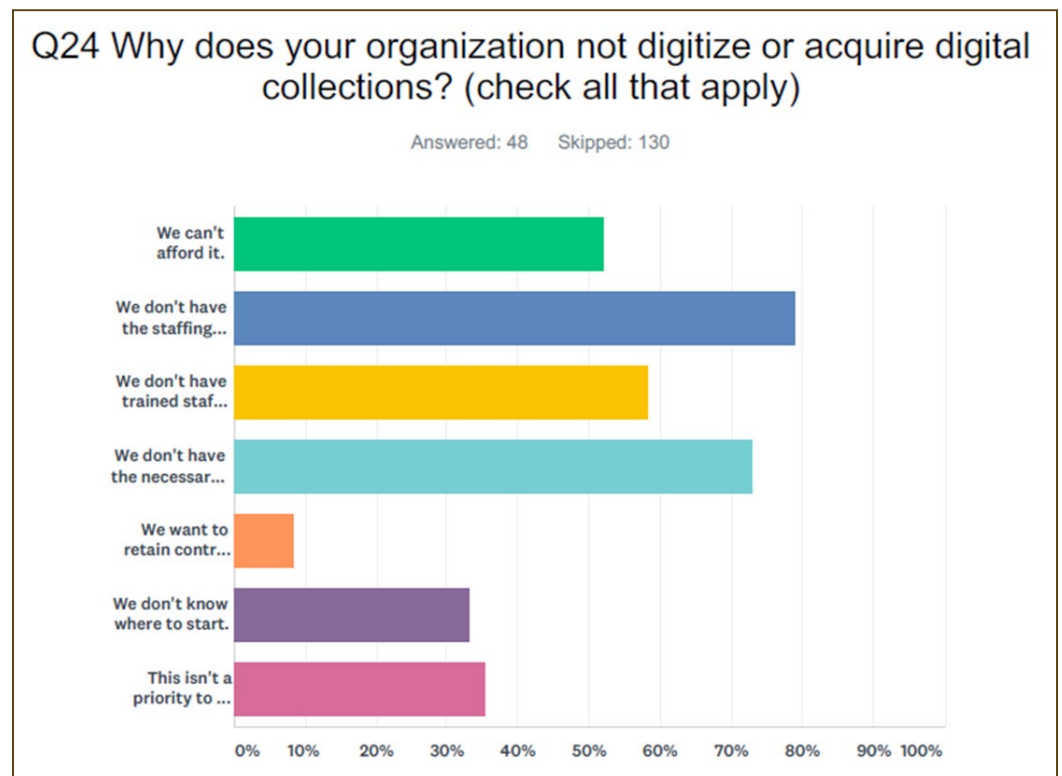
42 Digital Collections are Available Online



Types of Digital Collections



A pleasant surprise for Oregon Heritage staff was that our assumption that heritage organizations feel a sense of ownership about their collections as a reason not to digitize was disproven by the results. When asked why organizations don't digitize or acquire digital collections, the lowest percent (less than 10 percent) responded that it was because they want to retain control of the content. This reflects a noted change in staff's previous experience working with small heritage organizations. Rather, the barriers to digitizing fall in line with constraints of staff time, expenses, and prioritization.



While organizations didn't reflect a desire to retain control of content as a reason not to digitize, a clear concern that emerged in survey comments was that many heritage organizations rely on revenue from the sale of their digital images, and they don't want online access to restrict their ability to sell images. The seven organizations that expressed this concern were genealogical societies, small historical societies, and a rural public library. One responder wrote, "Some of the board is concerned about losing the opportunity to raise money for copies of our digitized photos if we have a cooperative venture" (Q31, Comment 3). Another responder wrote, "My organization is strict about maintaining revenue opportunities since we charge for access to our digital materials" (Q31, Comment 23). Collaborative partnerships must take this concern into account and educate groups about the quality and use of access images.




With Collaboration in Mind

The final section of the survey was designed to gauge interest in a variety of collaborative options that have been discussed by statewide partners. One set of questions asked survey takers for their level of interest in collaborative options for *digitizing* collections. The second set of questions asked their level of interest in collaborative options for *providing online access* to digital collections. Responders generally expressed interest in both areas. In response to digitizing, the majority were in favor of a loan system where equipment could be checked out and used for brief periods of time. A close second was interest in a “hub” where you could bring items to be digitized by someone else. The idea of a regional hub with shared equipment was less well received. Geographic distance and the cost of transferring items were referenced as barriers for some to participate in this type of collaboration.

For online access, a majority of responders were interested in the idea of contributing digital items to a more localized online system, either university-driven or a regional collaboration, rather than national. Organizations made clear that they are looking for trustworthy partners in collaboration. Several responders simply felt more comfortable with the materials staying in the community. One responder wrote, “We need collaborative options for making collections available online because we can never afford to have and maintain online collections ourselves. However, we want people to find us and be aware of us, for their support as members/donors or future visitors. So perhaps the further away from our location and community the materials go, the less visible we feel as a community resource” (Q31, Comment 46). Smaller organizations also want content available on their website in addition to a local repository. One survey responder wrote, “I want the records to be available at least locally, but the more people who have access the better” (Q31, Comment 1)!

Conclusion

The 2018 Survey of Digital Heritage Collections in Oregon documents a snapshot in time of existing digital heritage collections. A clear finding is that cultural heritage organizations in Oregon are actively digitizing their collections and have expressed an interest in working collaboratively. As a follow-up to the survey, the Heritage Commission is reaching out to individual organizations for more information and will continue to create basic tools and trainings that will be available through the Oregon Heritage MentorCorps program.

The Heritage Commission shares the results of our survey with our partners and the library community in order to continue seeking collaborative solutions for stewarding Oregon’s heritage collections, particularly looking to larger repositories to assist with the preservation of and access to smaller heritage collections. We know that small heritage organizations house unique collections that tell the story of our state. We also know that many small organizations do so with limited resources of time and money. The issue of capacity is well summed up by this survey comment, “We are great at digitizing, but it comes at the expense of our other collections work” (Q33, Comment 81). *For a complete copy of the results, contact Beth Dehn.* 

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